

Environment

encourages children to practice healthy behaviors

The mealtime environment — which includes the physical surroundings, the mealtime routine, the procedures for serving, and the social interactions during meals — plays an important role in encouraging healthy behaviors and promoting well-being.

Taking stock . . . check your cupboard

Connect the topic to your life. What are your experiences, opinions, and concerns? What do you need?

Imagine it is mealtime in your child care program and you are a young child. Think about the sights and sounds in the room. Replay in your imagination the mealtime routine and the activities that take place.

Mealtime environment assessment

For each of the following five pairs of statements, select the one that best describes the mealtime environment in your program. Even if neither one applies completely, pick the one that comes closest to describing your environment.

1. ☐ Tables and chairs are too high for some children and too low for other children.
☐ Tables and chairs are sized so that all children's feet are firmly on the floor and tabletops are mid-chest on all children.
2. ☐ Adults serve all foods onto children's plates.
☐ Small, lightweight serving bowls with rims are used so children can pass food around the table. Utensils are easily handled by children for self-serving.
3. ☐ Children are not allowed to serve themselves, avoiding messes and preventing contamination of food.
☐ Children are taught skills for safely passing foods. Adults monitor and respond with corrective measures when children cross-contaminate food.
4. ☐ Adults determine how much food is placed on children's plates.
☐ Adults support children as they learn how to choose portion sizes to match how much they can eat.
5. ☐ Mealtime routines are established to be convenient for staff scheduling and are structured to run smoothly by the clock.
☐ Children help maintain the meal environment by setting tables, helping clean spills, and clearing dishes. Adults allow for and respond to variances in routines, but still keep mealtimes focused.

Partner discussion

From the point of view of a child, describe something positive about your mealtime environment and something you think needs to be changed.

Assemble your ingredients and tools

Acquire the knowledge and skills you need to create the outcome you desire.

What is the optimal mealtime environment?

The optimal mealtime environment allows children to serve themselves and provides the physical surroundings, equipment, routine, and instruction for that to happen successfully. This is the environment that is needed to allow for what is referred to as “family-style service.”

What is ‘family-style service’?

It is when the food is placed in serving bowls on the table and children are encouraged to serve themselves rather than being served pre-plated food. The adult caregivers sit at the table with the children, assisting the children in serving, eating the same foods as the children, and engaging the children in pleasant conversation.

Why is ‘family-style service’ recommended?

Mealtime is much more than just a time to feed children. It is a time for children to learn new skills and independence, to practice getting along with others in a community setting, to learn manners, to practice the art of conversation, and to learn from adults and other children in a relaxed and pleasant setting. Mealtime is just as much an opportunity for learning as any other activity that takes place in your child care program.

The most common reasons given for not doing family-style service are:

- It may result in spills and messes.
- It might take longer than having adults do the serving.
- Children might contaminate the food by touching it.
- Children might take too much food, leading to waste, or they may take too little food, thus not meeting the guidelines for what children need.

Which ones keep you from doing family-style service?

As you watch the volunteers attempt family-style service, write down the problems you observe:

- Table and chairs:
- Serving bowls and utensils:
- Skills needed for children to serve themselves without spilling or contaminating food:

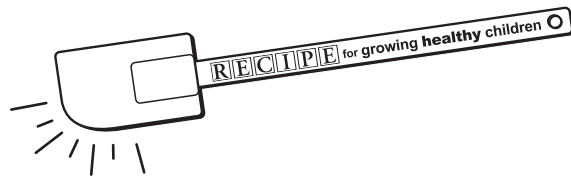
- Allowing children to determine how much to take:

- Involving children in all aspects of meal service and cleanup:

Note: *The staff training outline at the end of this section includes discussion points about each of these aspects of the mealtime environment.*

Create your dish

Apply what you've learned to create the outcome you desire.



We've looked at how family-style service can go wrong when the environment isn't supportive. Now let's look at a video clip of how it can work well in a real life child care setting. While you watch, look at the discussion points below and think of the ways you'd like to improve your mealtime environment.

Watch video clip.

Table discussion

Discuss with your table:

- What did you see in the video that showed the children building independence? Were you surprised by any of the skills you saw exhibited?
- How would you describe the attitude of the children as they performed mealtime tasks? Did they appear to enjoy doing things for themselves?
- What did you see in the video that showed the children building community? Describe the interactions you observed between children and between children and caregivers.

Here are some other ideas for creating a more desirable mealtime environment. Which ones of these might work for you?

- In the same way we redefined our role from cook to chef, consider renaming your kitchen or cafeteria, or even the classroom at mealtime, to the Child Care Café, using a play on words with your program's name. Using words like *café* or *bistro* is fun and elevates your food service image.
- Consider putting centerpieces on the table at mealtime, at least occasionally. A bowl of fruit, a vase with a head of broccoli, or a carrot with greens can be attractive and functional. The children can even create seasonal centerpieces. Scented fake candles, subdued lighting, and soft music can add ambiance and improve manners at mealtime.

- Children enjoy singing. Use this song to build excitement before a meal is served:

Great Food Is Comin'

(to the tune of "She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain")

Chef sings to children as they enter the room:

Great food is comin' to your table, here it comes!
Great food is comin' to your table, here it comes!
See the pretty colors and smell the yummy flavors
Pass the dish for everyone to taste!

Children sing to chef:

Great food is comin' to our table, thank you Chef!
Great food is comin' to our table, thank you Chef!
We see the pretty colors and smell the yummy flavors
We'll pass the dish for everyone to taste!

Self-Reflection

Imagine again that you are a young child in your child care program. Think about what an optimum mealtime environment could look like and feel like. Picture the room, the table and chairs, the sounds and conversations, and how it feels to practice new skills in serving yourself and helping others. How does that differ from what you imagined earlier? Would you like to make your new vision a reality?

Take your “dish” home. Share it with others, savor it yourself, and make it even better.

Define what you desire to achieve and make a plan to succeed.

1. Based on today's discussion, the one aspect of our mealtime environment that I would like to tackle first is:
2. The one idea we could try out for making a positive change is:
3. When do I plan to evaluate our current mealtime environment? Set a date and commit to selecting resources from the list on page 14.

- Take it back to your workplace and share it with co-workers and parents.
- Reflect on it personally and continue to learn more.
- Evaluate your progress on meeting your goals to set yourself up for ongoing success.

Serve it — A plan for staff training

Plan to have your meeting in a room where children eat meals so you can see the actual mealtime environment as you discuss ways to make it as optimal as possible. Using the assessment printed earlier in this Chef's Workbook (repeated below), or one downloaded from the list in the "Savor it" section later in this chapter, have the staff complete the assessment as a group, or complete it individually and then discuss as a group.

Group discussion: Mealtime environment assessment

SAY: "For each of the five pairs of statements that follow, select the one that best describes the mealtime environment in our program. Even if neither one applies completely, pick the one that comes closest to describing our environment."

1. ☐ Tables and chairs are too high for some children and too low for other children.
☐ Tables and chairs are sized so that all children's feet are firmly on the floor and tabletops are mid-chest on all children.
2. ☐ Adults serve all foods onto children's plates.
☐ Small, lightweight serving bowls with rims are used so children can pass food around the table. Utensils are easily handled by children for self-serving.
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4. ☐ Adults determine how much food is placed on children's plates.
☐ Adults support children as they learn how to choose portion sizes to match how much they can eat.
5. ☐ Mealtime routines are established to be convenient for staff scheduling and are structured to run smoothly by the clock.
☐ Children help maintain the meal environment by setting tables, helping clean spills, and clearing dishes. Adults allow for and respond to variances in routines, but still keep mealtimes focused.

DO: Have each staff member share something positive about the mealtime environment and one thing they think needs to be changed.

SAY: “Here is a description of the optimal mealtime environment and family-style service: The optimal mealtime environment allows children to serve themselves and provides the physical surroundings, equipment, routine, and instruction for that to happen successfully. This is the environment that is needed to allow for what is referred to as “family-style service.”

“Now let’s discuss to what degree our program practices family-style service and the barriers, if any, to doing it more fully.”

DO: If desired, in another room set up an “over-sized” table and chairs and simulate children passing a large bowl as was done in the culinary workshop.

SAY: “Now let’s go through five discussion points for comparing a poor environment with an optimal environment.”

1. How do you determine the right size for tables and chairs? How can you make tables and chairs fit your children?

If your table height isn’t somewhere between each child’s nipple line and belly button, it is too high or too low and they will have trouble serving themselves and eating. You can also check for proper table height by seeing how comfortably the children’s elbows and forearms rest on the table. When they sit at the table, the table shouldn’t be so high that their arms spread out like “chicken wings.” To correct this problem, use booster seats or put catalogs on the chair seats to make the table height correct for each child. If the table is too low, it’s time to move the child up to the next size of table.

If the chair height doesn’t allow the children’s feet to be firmly planted on the floor, they will not be able to turn their trunks to pass food to one another and will be much more likely to spill. Hand skills improve by three-fold when feet are firmly planted on the floor. If the heights are not correct, you don’t have to purchase new chairs — just place something on the floor as a footrest.

2. What are the proper types of serving bowls and utensils?

Children can’t be expected to pass dishes that are too large or heavy, or to use serving utensils that are too large for small hands to manage. You don’t have to buy anything specialized — small, lightweight bowls with rims are easy to pass and can be purchased anywhere. Have enough of them at the table so small amounts of food can be placed in each one and children don’t have to wait to serve themselves until one bowl makes it all the way around the table. For a serving spoon, a standard tablespoon works well. Keep handles relatively short, because long handles will encourage unwanted flinging of food.

3. Do we teach children how to serve themselves or do we serve the food to them? Are there some foods we allow the children to serve themselves?

Children can learn how to safely serve themselves without making messes or contaminating the food, but it requires patient instruction and guidance from adults at the table. When children are passing food around the table, teach them to turn toward the person they are passing to, look that person in the eye, and make sure that person has a firm grip on the bowl. The child being passed to can communicate that they have their hands firmly on the bowl by nodding or saying thank you.

DO: Demonstrate passing a bowl and then practice.

Food safety is a natural concern when children serve themselves, but just like all of the skills involved in family-style service, children can learn how to pass food and use utensils without contaminating the food.

4. Do we worry that children will take too much or too little food when they serve themselves?

Remember, we are *not* required to make sure children *eat* a certain amount of food, or even that a certain amount of food gets onto their plates. We just have to be sure that we've prepared enough for all children to have the amount specified by the USDA in the Child and Adult Care Food Program guidelines and that it is put on the table for them. Studies show that children who feel pressured to eat something actually become *more* "fussy" or "picky" than when they are allowed to decide if and when to try a food.

When children aren't used to serving themselves, they will often overestimate and take more than they can eat. However, with time, children become excellent judges of how much they are hungry for, and studies show that there is much less waste than when adults do the serving. Children who serve themselves become more sensitive to their internal hunger and fullness cues and are less likely to overeat.

5. Is our mealtime routine centered on staff convenience or on creating a learning environment for the children we serve?

Children who are provided with age-appropriate ways to participate in all aspects of the meal experience build skills and independence. They become cooperative members of their classroom community and learn to share with others. When involved in the meal setup and cleanup, they learn to serve others. It may seem easier for adults to do these tasks for them, but with guidance and practice it not only builds responsible children, but also makes our jobs easier. Serving family-style also encourages polite talk and good manners as food is passed and served.

Note to presenter:

The resources listed at the end of this section provide guidance on how to implement every aspect of family-style service. Plan to use several at this training, or at a follow-up meeting. These include completing a more in-depth assessment if not done already, discussing how to teach young children to serve themselves, best practices for serving foods, and responsiveness at mealtimes.

Group observation and discussion

SAY: “Now let’s look at a video clip of how family-style service can work well in a real-life child care setting.”

DO: Show the video clip from the workshop DVD showing family-style service. Then have a group discussion of the following points.

ASK: “What did you see in the video that showed the children building independence? Were you surprised by any of the skills you saw exhibited?”

“How would you describe the attitude of the children as they performed mealtime tasks? Did they appear to enjoy doing things for themselves?”

“What did you see in the video that showed the children building community? How would you describe the interactions you observed between children and between children and caregivers.”

Group discussion

DO: Download the *Make a Vision and It Will Become Reality* worksheet listed in the “Savor it” section later in this chapter, and use it to discuss the mealtime environment you and your staff would like to create. Make a copy of the action plan page (page 8) of the workbook for each staff member, have each person fill it out and share his or her responses with the entire group.

Make a plan to regularly discuss your progress in creating an optimal environment and to set new goals.

Serve it — A plan for parent education

Parents are interested in how their children eat while in child care. Parents also want to know how they can do a better job with feeding their children at home. Educate your parents about the importance of family-style dining and how they can incorporate the same principles at home if they are not currently doing so. The following links will provide you with resources you can share as handouts or newsletters, on a bulletin board, or in a parent meeting.

- www.ellynsatter.com
Click on “Children and Their Eating.” There are many brief articles related to children and eating. On the “Resources” page, under “Guides and Policies,” you can download Ellyn Satter’s feeding policy statement for child care facilities. Also on the “Resources” page, under “Educational Materials,” you can download Ellyn Satter handouts for parents titled *Division of Responsibility in Feeding and Helping Children Be Good Eaters*.
- www.touchingheartstouchingminds.com
Click on “Healthy Eating” in the drop-down menu under “Emotion-Based Materials.” There are many topics you can select using the pull-down menu. There is a handout and a discussion guide with each topic.
- www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals/
Click on “Resources” and then click on “Parents.” You will find handouts for promoting family meals.
- www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/nibbles.html
This is a newsletter for parents of young children on a variety of nutrition topics.
- http://depts.washington.edu/tvhealth/healthy_habits_materials.htm
This site has posters, handouts, and bookmarks about family meals.
- www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm
The link under “April 2007” goes to a packet of resources with conversation starters for children of all ages.
- Lesson One in *Raising Healthy Eaters* covers “Parent Provides, Child Decides” which covers the importance of the division of responsibility in feeding. In Indiana, contact the Purdue Extension office in your county for more information. www.extension.purdue.edu/extsite/counties.shtml

Savor it — Learning more about creating a positive environment

Select one of the following excellent resources to do a comprehensive evaluation of your eating environment and learn strategies to create the optimal environment:

- www.ag.uidaho.edu/feeding
Click on “Activities” to access numerous handouts. These include an evaluation of feeding environments for young children, many handouts providing guidance in implementing family-style service, including the worksheet recommended for staff goal-setting titled *Make a Vision and It Will Become Reality*. A more comprehensive assessment, *Building Mealtimes Environments and Relationships Inventory*, is available on this Web site’s home page. All of these materials are available for downloading.
- www.cacfp.org/
The Child and Adult Care Food Program Sponsor’s Association has a module for staff training on family-style service titled *Happy Mealtimes for Healthy Children* that is available to members of this association as a two-hour workshop and as a self-study. Click on “Provider Training” and “Happy Mealtimes for Healthy Children.”
- http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/Alaska/HSSection_1B.pdf
The Alaska Head Start Program developed a training resource, which includes this seven-page module on nutrition in the classroom. It includes a self-assessment that includes the eating environment as well as other components of the nutrition and food program.

1. How well did I/we use the idea I/we selected at the workshop to change one aspect of our mealtime environment?
2. Have I/we used one of the assessment or training tools available online? What have I done with this information?
3. Did we have a staff meeting/in-service training to discuss the eating environment? How did it go?
4. Have we provided parents with any education or resources about family style service and/or the division of responsibility in feeding? How?

References and resources

- www.ellynsatter.com
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Click on “Emotional-Based Materials” and then “Healthy Eating.”
- www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals/
Click on “Resources” and then click on “Parents.” You will find handouts for promoting family meals.
- www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/nibbles.html
This is a newsletter for parents of young children on a variety of nutrition topics.
- http://depts.washington.edu/tvhealth/healthy_habits_materials.htm
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